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Bavington's Sophisticated and Savvy Abstracts Exude Joy

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
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TIMES ART CRITIC

The L.A. solo-debut by Las Vegas-based painter Tim Bavington keeps the recent push on abstract painting going full-tilt. His four gorgeous canvases at Mark Moore Gallery are a fresh and savvy reinterpretation of stripe paintings, here given an up-tempo musical spin. With the look of universal pricing codes on commercial packaging--except written large and in glorious Technicolor--the four unfold in a kind of formal narrative through the room.

First comes a small painting whose deeply beveled stretcher bars push the vertically striped surface plane way out from the wall. (Titled "All Too Beautiful," it is.) Next comes "Science," a large work whose scores of multicolored stripes are carefully matched up on the gray scale, which forms a horizontal bar that runs along the bottom edge. Third is an even bigger painting, "Lazy Sunday," where the gray stripes are replaced with a cool turquoise band, which creates a breezy through-line for the hot rhythm of tropical pinks, yellows, oranges and magentas above.

Finally, the kicker: "Acquiescence II" is a 50-inch-tall diptych that runs more than 21 feet across the back wall. As the title might suggest, it's a painting that grabs you by the lapels and pulls you over--then practically asks you to dance.

As with the other paintings, the vertical stripes are sprayed on in military-straight lines of varying widths. Sometimes the spray is high and tight; sometimes it's loose and overlays the stripe adjacent, making for a retinal shift in hue or an optical sense of shallow space. The assumption is that one line was sprayed after the next, from side to side across the vast expanse, with incremental decisions made about what comes next and careful modulations added as necessary.



Whatever the case, the overall sense is of a complex orchestration of palette, bandwidth and composition. Linearity and color are as seamlessly, inseparably fused as horizontal is with vertical. The colors are lush--a typical sequence across a few inches goes persimmon, bright orange, tan, ochre, flame red, yellow, electric blue--with an optical fuzz between them. The far left end reads cool, the far right end reads blazing hot, but Bavington takes you all the way from icy blue to searing crimson without letting the vast, happily trembling surface in between devolve into chaos.

These are paintings about the joyful possibilities of painting. Bavington's complex, sure-footed abstractions establish a sophisticated and luxurious universe.

* Mark Moore Gallery, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 453-3031, through July 8. Closed Sunday and Monday.

Ceramic Times: When Gertrud and Otto Natzler fled Vienna for Los Angeles after Austria's annexation to Germany in 1938, they brought with them a rigorous European aesthetic valued more today for what happened in its wake than for what it is in its own right. Rambunctious, cheeky, aggressive Otis clay--the revolutionary ceramic art that represents perhaps the first authentic avant-garde movement in postwar L.A. art--set itself against the exquisitely refined, holistic aesthetic epitomized by the Natzlers' gorgeous ceramics.

A 50-year survey of the Natzlers' work at Couturier Gallery offers an excellent opportunity to see what was being upended by the Otis gang. In today's post-avant-garde time, however, it also happily underscores the intrinsic quality of the Natzlers' craft. There are three dozen works in the show--two-thirds dating from the 1950s and 1960s, several never exhibited before--and they include some exceptional pieces.

Gertrud (who died in 1971) was a potter, Otto a fabric designer who became the "surface" man in their ceramic collaboration after they settled in L.A. She threw delicate, graceful, precisely controlled forms on the wheel--cylinders, bowls, bottles, vases--while he worked with glazes and firing techniques.

Gertrud refined a catalog of ancient forms, making vessels that were loosely akin to the mass-produced variety familiar in the 1950s, but distinguished by a polish and cultivation possible only in the artist's studio, not the industrial factory. And Otto invented literally hundreds of glazes--metallic, multicolored, cratered and more--that he manipulated (along with the courtship of chance) in the kiln, turning the atomic terror of modern science into something ravishing to hold in your hands.

The result is ceramics that feel like up-to-the-minute interpretations of classic vessels. The Natzlers' work is characterized by the resolution of a subtle but distinctive anxiety--a quiet tension between something that looks back with longing to a time long before the modern era and something wholly unthinkable without it. Conservative by most standards of postwar art, their ceramics nonetheless represent an important and revealing current.

* Couturier Gallery, 166 N. La Brea Ave., (323) 933-5557, through July 1. Closed Sunday and Monday.

Mullican Man: In the main gallery at LACE, Matt Mullican has juxtaposed his present with his past. How he got from there to here is the focus of the appealing installation, which bridges shorthand for the real and the ideal, the personal and the collective, adolescence and adulthood, in a quirky and provocative way.

The front of the gallery houses a knee-high construction that represents the New York-based artist's familiar high-tech symbol for a modern cosmology--a geometric, cell-like form with a circle inscribed inside a rectangle, painted in bright primary hues. The rear of the gallery holds a second knee-high construction of the same overall dimensions, built from dry-wall, that approximates the floor plan of the house in Santa Monica where Mullican grew up.

One "room" has a pillow and crumpled red blanket tossed in the corner; another has a table and chairs and a long piece of paper marked up with sketchy doodles in black paint; a third has a drawing tablet strewn on the floor. The objects look like residue from an event.

At the side, a television monitor plays a continuous loop of a live public performance Mullican did in the schematic house, one where he was hypnotized to encourage the free flow of memory. He hides under the table, huddles along the wall, crawls across the floor, mumbles in frustrating grunts. (A mostly silent audience watches.) Sometimes funny, sometimes poignant, the taped performance is oddly touching.

In these two spaces, the messy incoherence of subjective experience butts up against the cheery orderliness of objective thought. Mullican's crisp, attractive and slightly chilling symbol of the modern world begins to look a poignant fantasy, built from a yearning born of childhood loss.

* LACE, 6522 Hollywood Blvd., (323) 957-1777, through July 22. Closed Sunday-Tuesday.

The Sensual "Way": The six new paintings by Monique Prieto at Acme Gallery display an agitated energy new to her work. Her typically languorous abstract shapes of flat color on unprimed canvas have been headed in this direction, but now they seem to have arrived.

Shapes still recline, stretch, probe one another. Some snuggle and caress, others poke and prod. Occasionally the touching has an erotic edge: "All the Way" is a small orgy of drizzly blues, violets and greens.

But these paintings have a lot of skinny, linear shapes, which animates things considerably by pulling your eye quickly across the surface. Edges are rougher and more jagged, too, making even large expanses of flat color seem less benign.

In "Warm Body," the largest and strongest work here, a big, elephantine, pale blue shape clambers over a smaller violet-gray one, which incongruously seems to grin. In "Pound for Pound" the raw canvas asserts itself as a presence, visually pushing its way up into a puddle of royal blue that seems to cling to a little lemon-yellow shape for stability and support.

Without resorting to traditional painterly methods of anthropomorphism, Prieto manages to create watchable characters out of her abstract shapes--both painted and not. A lively little drama is slowly unfolding.

* Acme Gallery, 6150 Wilshire Blvd., (323) 857-5942, through July 5. Closed Sunday and Monday.



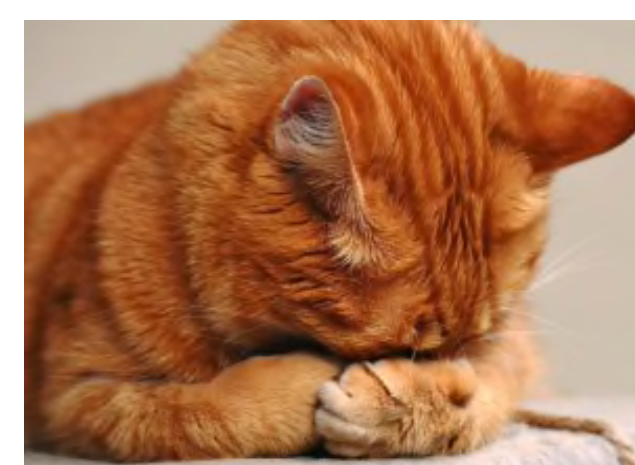
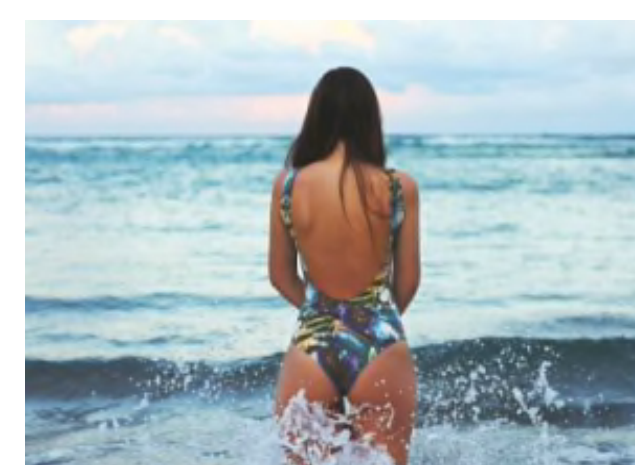
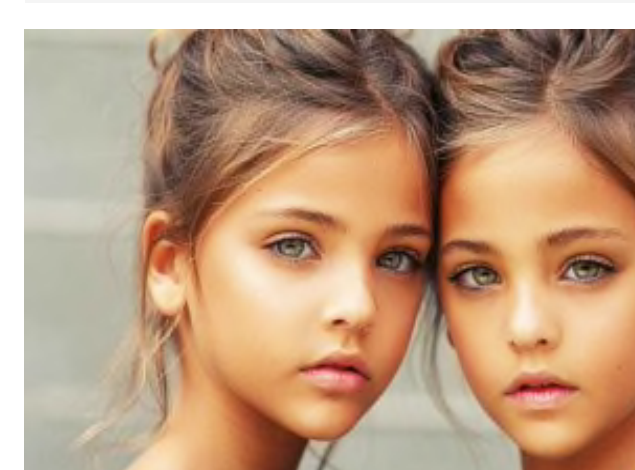
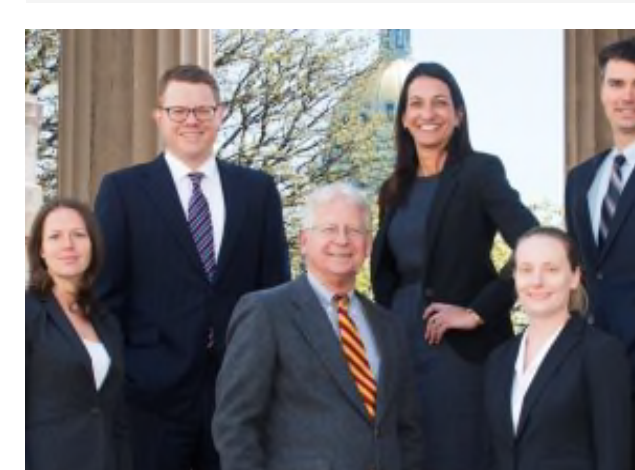
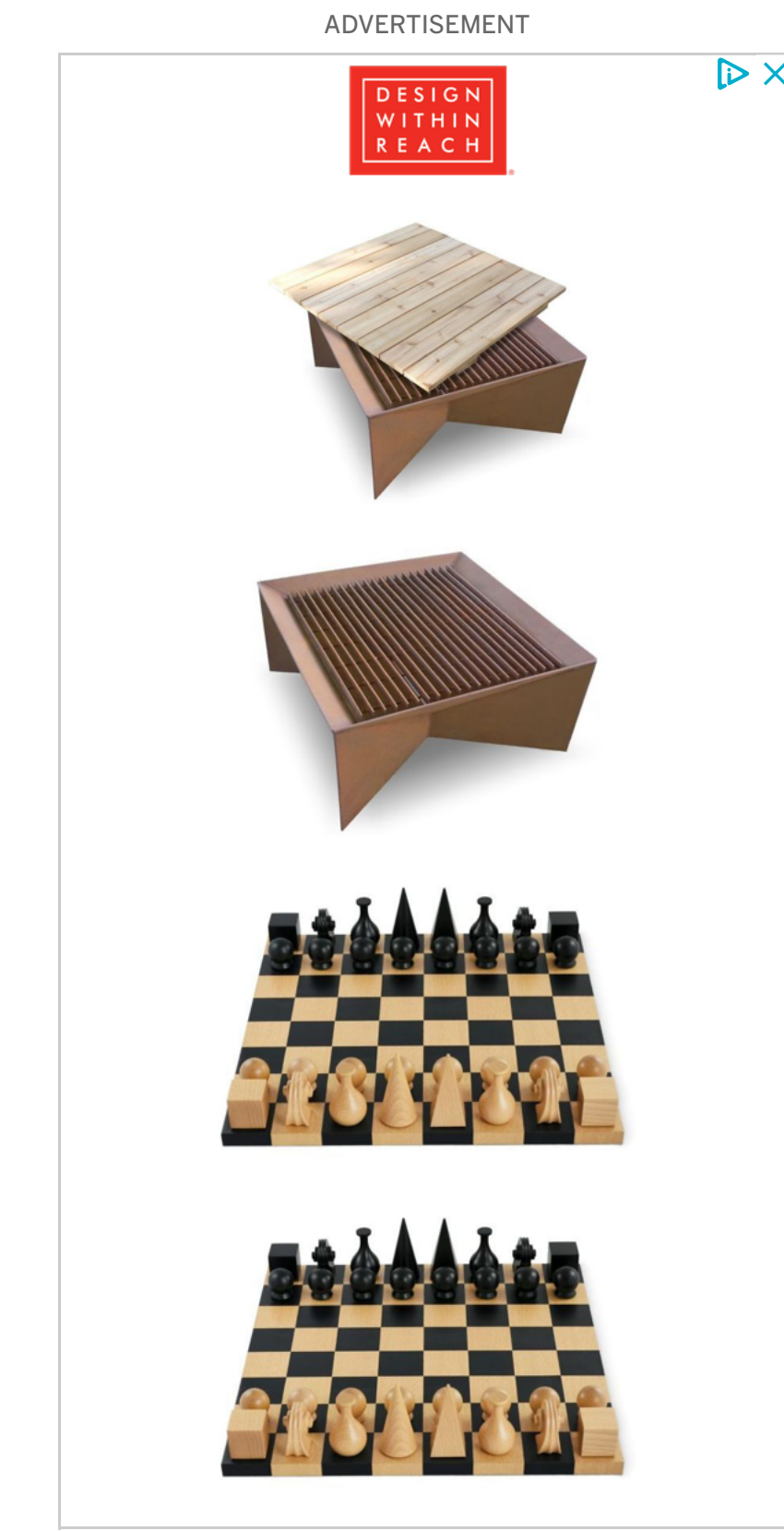
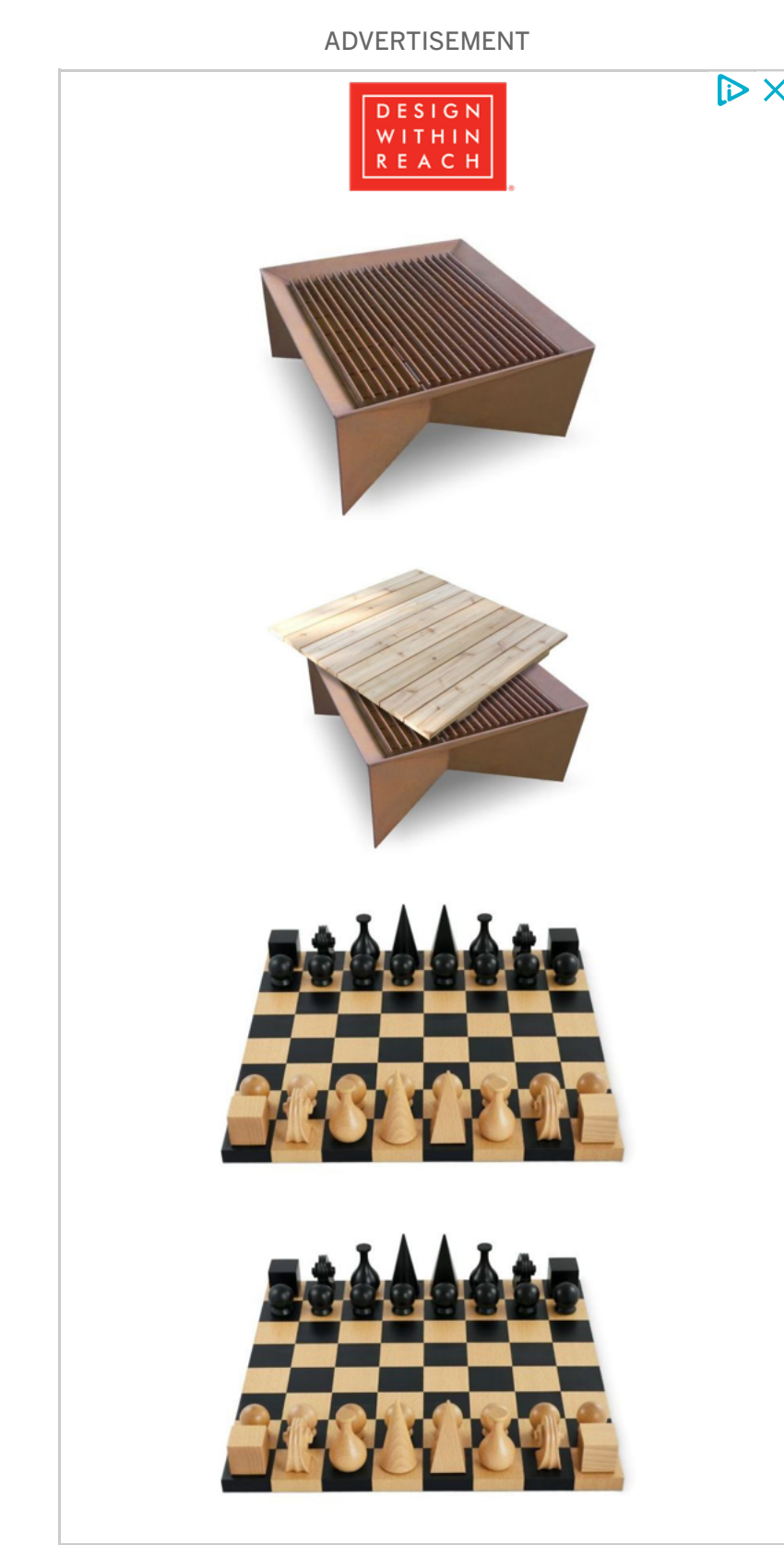
Christopher Knight

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Los Angeles Times art critic Christopher Knight won the 2020 **Pulitzer Prize for criticism** (he was a finalist for the prize in 1991, 2001 and 2007). In 2020, he also received the Lifetime Achievement Award in Art Journalism from the Rabkin Foundation.

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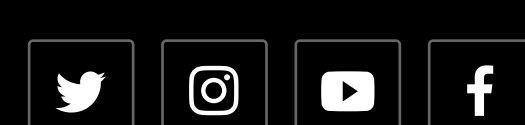
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